

MUSIC TEACHERS.CO.UK
...the internet service for practical musicians.

Perfect your Practice!

A pupil's guide to making effective progress.

© 2002 MusicTeachers.co.uk

Perfect your practice!

“10% inspiration and 90% perspiration” – like it or not, a good practice regime is the backbone of success in learning an instrument. The greatest teachers, the most perfect love of music, the finest ear in the world...you can have them all, but without the day-in-day-out routine of practice, you may as well chop the piano up for firewood, flog your flute and save the singing for Sundays.

The problem that most people have – even the most seasoned and successful professionals – is that they get BORED!

So what to do?

INSPIRATION

Never forget why you are taking the time and trouble to play.

1. Go to concerts (and sit on the front row if you can).
2. Try to listen to one new piece of music every week – try to make it something completely different – a real discovery. You don't have to like it, you just have to hear it.
3. Spend time with other musicians doing the same thing. Nobody likes being lonely – if you have friends who are musicians, then you will start to feel a lot more involved in your own playing. After all, if you play football, chess or act in plays, you will be doing it with friends. Why do musicians have to go it alone? So don't just sit there with your scales, go and find clubs and societies. You are never too young or inexperienced to join a band, orchestra or group. There should be no such thing as a soloist; musicians work together and that is that. If you are on your own with nobody to encourage you except your teacher, you are DOOMED TO FAIL.
4. Be very careful about the sacrifices you make for your music. Don't ever try to give up the things that you like to make time for practice – it just won't work. A favourite TV programme, a computer game, football, cinema, whatever you like, they all deserve your time.

DISCIPLINE

Now you want to do it, what happens when the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak?

Practice time is sacred time. There are some hours in the day when you sleep, some when you eat and some when you practice. That's the end of it. You are not a normal person anymore, you are a musician and you will just have to make allowances. Think about your day, work out when is best, set a time of the day for practice that won't cause big problems and stick to it like glue.

NO EXCUSES!

The following are common excuses that are usually made by deadbeats, losers and wimps and certainly not musicians:

1. "I have homework / SATS tests / school exams / a work presentation blah..blah..blah"
Let's be honest about this – if you slack on practice, chances are you slack on the lot. (That homework is probably 20 rushed minutes in front of the telly, anyway.) Don't make excuses! You might have a lot to get through, but you can do it all and do it all well if you get yourself organised. Think about the time that you waste each day and worry about that for starters.
2. "We have had family / friends to stay blah..blah..blah"
Not much to say about them if they really have messed up your routine and, while we are on the subject, do they know that you are blaming them for being a lazy-good-for-nothing?
3. "Next door's dog died and I have been a bit upset blah..blah..blah"
Oh come off it – you still watched telly, played computer games, went to the cinema and ate ice-cream.
4. "I am on holiday for the next four weeks, so I won't be doing any practice blah..blah..blah".

If you really do allow that kind of interruption in your musicianship, you really will be taking two-steps forward and one step backwards. It's your choice – do you want music to be fun or frustrating?

So be brave and don't let anything put you off. If 6-7pm is practice time every day, then stick to it. Tell your friends that you are busy, meet them later. It is not such a big deal.

HELP FROM YOUR FRIENDS

Above all, family and friends should be supportive. It is not fair if everyone else is having a party whilst you are downstairs in a grimy cellar with a candle and a book of exercises. Try to make others appreciate the fact that you need to stick to a regular practice routine and not to organise things that conflict with this. It is all too easy to get into the routine of saying to yourself 'I'll just do 5 minutes today because so-and-so is coming round, but I'll do 90 tomorrow' – this is the slippery slope to achieving nothing!

THE MASTER PLAN

Measure your practice in achievement and not in time. You need to decide if you are a zombie or not. Zombies look at the clock and start on their instrument. Exactly thirty minutes later they look at the clock again and stop. What did they play, learn, enjoy? Who knows and who cares. It was all a waste of time anyway.

If you have decided that you are not a zombie (good call), this is what you should be doing:

1. First decide what you want to work on. Always begin with scales and exercises. This is NON-NEGOTIABLE. Planes have wings, cars have wheels and musicians have scales. If you can't stomach it, give up now.

A sample plan might be like this:

- a. Two scales and arpeggios. Work on them until they are even, accurate and clear.
 - b. Work on a technical exercise or study. Choose a section, a page, a few bars and solve problems, improve fluency, memorise etc
 - c. Repertoire Piece1: ten bars on page three, semiquavers on page 4 and the first and second time bars on page 5.
 - d. Repertoire Piece2: work on performance stamina– play the whole piece over at a slow tempo trying to keep things steady and relaxed.
2. Work through your plan moving on only when you are happy that you have actually made progress. Don't set too much for yourself and concentrate only on making things better. Forget how much time it takes. Twenty minutes of smart practice is better than 20 zombie hours.
 3. Always throw in the extra unplanned stuff. There must be film tunes, show songs, classical pieces, jazz songs, pop songs that you want to play that you would not take to a music lesson but just want to have a go at. Not everything that you do with an instrument has to be structured. Just dive in and see what you can manage. You will learn more than you can possibly imagine (especially sight-reading) and the thrill factor when you get a piece together is one of the best there is.

PERFORM, PERFORM, PERFORM

You have to ask yourself why you are a musician? Is it to practice or is it to perform? The whole point is surely to play and entertain (even if really you are just performing for yourself!). Therefore you should ALWAYS be looking forward to the next performance. That means a real date in your diary, something on the calendar in the kitchen, a memo on your PC...

Any of the following might be good:

1. Private party
2. School concert
3. Work reception
4. Society event, garden party, club meeting
5. Competition (there are lots of these for all levels – don't be put off by the word "competition" – you do these things to learn to perform. No more. Music is not about "winning", it is about thrilling, soothing, calming, exciting in live performance.)
6. Teacher's concert – all the pupils turn up and play to each other

7. Day / weekend / holiday courses – lots of these going on all the time. Ask your teacher, look in libraries, music centres, shops and magazines and of course use the internet to find out more.
8. Exams – Graded music exams are very helpful indeed. Some very experienced and talented musicians have put these together to help you make solid, steady progress.
9. Concert with friends / other musicians. You don't have to perform as a soloist – a concert in an ensemble is always a great experience.

There is nothing like a performance in the diary to make you get on and practice. Most people get nervous about playing in public, but that is all part of being a musician and with the nerves comes the excitement and exhilaration of achievement. It is more than worth the effort.

GOOD LUCK!